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## VIRGIL AND APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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In Rome we find little trace of a broad historical outlook before Virgil's time, and this is but natural, since the historic sense is born in the wake of world-movements and not in the van, and the prophet is the child of calamity rather than of triumph. We cannot be sure under these circumstances whether the divine Julius himself was quite aware whether his presence in Gaul was due to imperial prevision, to the spirit of the explorer and adventurer, to the pressing need of Gallic gold, or to the necessity of procuring immunity from epileptic seizures by active campaigning in the open air. Not a trace of the background of his thought has been left to us, and I am skeptical enough to believe that it possessed little background. From the wide erudition of Cicero we might hope for something more, but lawyers, professors, and textbook-makers are not members of inspired tribes, and Cicero was all of these. His outlook is egoistic, partisan, professional, and urban; he is a Tory and not a Liberal, a Jeremiah and not an Isaiah, a Don Quixote tilting against windmills, a classicist and not a romanticist; his eyes are blind to all far-off divine events and his vision myopic to all but the death struggles of an effete body politic whose vigor he essayed to restore by the transfusion of the rich and copious tide of his eloquence. Of dear and lovable Livy little need be said. He belongs in the same class with Sir Roger de Coverley, an amiable old gentleman with the added gift of the silver tongue, a white soul, fit to live with Virgil and Varius, nor can we doubt that his spirit dwells in Elysian fields. His history is a labor of love, a honeycomb of sentiment, and a sweet elegy for Rome, but the circle of Rome's walls is the circle of the world to him and no distant footsteps echo in his ears.

<sup>1</sup> Read at the meeting of the American Philological Association at the University of Pennsylvania, December 28, 1917.

It is Virgil alone who has gone up to the mountain tops and descended into the depths. So liberally did he share in the universal soul that his spirit overflows environment and his mind transcends accounting. Nourished in the same atmosphere as Catullus, the lovely lad that found no Adriadne to lead him through the labyrinth and gave his dear life to the Minotaur of Roman snobbery; drinking at the same spring that poisoned Lucretius, the most profoundly religious spirit that ever went astray; fed at the same table as Horace, the nightingale among the ravens, whose slender wings could never essay the flights of the swan, Virgil alone was able to send his soul out into the invisible through uncharted space to bring back to men strange inklings of teasing mysteries that never cease to puzzle and never cease to charm. The times cannot account for him nor surroundings explain him. The white lily draws its food from the same earth as the reddening rose, and the poppy's roots may nestle among the wheat, but wheat is wheat and poppies are poppies.

So Virgil is Virgil, and more we can hardly say. We may perhaps say of him that he was a romanticist and not a classicist, and we may say of a romanticist that he reaches out for a beauty and reality that never was on land or sea, while the classicist gathers and schools his powers to recover once more a beauty and reality with which human endeavor has already crowned itself. Cicero, the classicist, knew what he wanted; the models and patterns of his thought were as manifestly embodied in the art of Greece as his political ideals were fashioned upon the disjected members of the Roman Republic. Lucretius, unlike Horace, has taken the oath of fidelity to a master whom he believes to be divine, and his conception of the highest good admits of definition both precise and sufficient. Livy is a man of dreams but not of visions. The divine Julius is a worshiper of destiny, a destiny as unswerving as the wall of the plumb line. Horace also sees too much of unaccountable chance in life to catch the vision of realms beyond the bourne of time and place. Virgil alone has caught the gleam of the Holy Grail.

It is not the hero Aeneas but the poet himself who is the exile of fate, tossing about on strange seas of thought alone, seeking a

promised land that forever retreats before him, a vagrant soul, a star unfixed from the firmament that trails a path of flame across the night. It is not the hero but the poet who goes down into the depths of hell through the dismal corridors of the dark to behold the radiant souls that wait their turn behind the lines to take their places on the firing line of life. It was his spirit that longed and yearned to find peace and contentment for itself in the contemplation of the past, in the fond memories of a Troy that had been; but he could not. No means of satisfaction that sage or poet had found or discovered in life could appease the hunger of his soul. Even at the last hour, when he lay panting on his couch in that fateful September at Brundisium, the sense of partial frustration came over him once more, the sensation of baffled effort, the conviction that life held a larger content than he had seized, had he been but spared to follow knowledge like a sinking star beyond the utmost bounds of human thought.

For picayune prophecy, for the sort of Sibylline oracle that gave confidence to Sulla and sent Lentulus into the Catilinarian conspiracy, for the vulgar thaumaturgist that struck awe into the hearts of the superstitious, for the Chaldean who fattened on the folly of peasant and prince, Virgil had only scorn and contempt. "Fie on the blindness of seers!" he exclaims as Dido is pictured with parted lips bending over the palpitating vitals of the victims. "Their heart is as fat as grease," he might say with the psalmist. "After the astounding event they prophesied," he cried as the random arrow of Acestes caught fire in the clouds. For the petty predictions that clustered about the name of Aeneas in the legends of the oracle-mongers he found no room in the *Aeneid*. If the Sibyl opens the future to him it must be an ample future. She must tell, not of a prosperous city-state, but of a happy world, of the order of the ages, of a glorious day that is coming, of an end of evil, of a savior descended from heaven itself. The Messianic Eclogue marks the emancipation of his spirit; it is vibrant with the thrill of the first flight of a soul that has found itself; it is the first draft of the *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* itself is the Messianic Eclogue drawn to a larger scale. The enthusiastic dream of the youth finds its fulfilment in the sober heart of the man.

When thoughts like these are surging through the minds of men and the fierce light of insolent reason is beating upon the heavens, it is small wonder that the gods themselves are stimulated to strange activity; that Venus, leaving the lap of Mars, is moved to plan for the distant future and try her unaccustomed hand at the game of world-politics; that Juno, ceasing to hector her lord and master about late hours and gay company, decides to stake her all upon world-power or downfall; that even Vulcan becomes a prophet and perceives that the shield of Achilles will not fit the shoulders of Aeneas. For the simple-minded Greeks it was well enough to depict a gray-bearded jury listening to a murder trial, a gang of lusty pirates looting a peaceful town, a man with a wine-jug waiting at the end of a field for a lot of tipsy plowmen, a lad singing catchy songs in a grapery, a portly landlord with a stick presiding over a barbecue in a harvest field, and a picnic in ancient Crete. For the matter-of-fact Achaeans the slim theory of art for art's sake was sufficient, but the romantic Roman demanded meat. Larger ideas must be set in motion. The shield of Aeneas must have a meaning for time and eternity, the history of Rome be ordained from the beginning, empire prearranged and without end. Troy may become a mournful memory in the minds of men, but Rome must bequeath a more substantial legacy to mankind. The fall of the Republic is not the end. The fate of Ilium may fill the world with tears and life's tragedies touch the hearts of men, but Virgil's soul has gone down into the depths and has found light. The secret of the past has revealed the secret of the future, and he it is, and not Nestor, who knows the things that are, the things that have been, and the things that shall be. "Thine it shall be, remember, Roman, to rule the nations; these shall be thy arts, to lay upon men the way of peace, to show mercy to the conquered, to war down the proud." Tears for the fallen Troy, confident hope and unwavering faith for the sons of Quirinus.

Virgil must have drunk of some spring that goes unmentioned in Pauly-Wissowa, some waters of more potent virtue than his contemporaries knew. The high walls and snobbish exclusiveness of late Republican elegance and urbanity, even the longer radius and wider circumference of the Augustan circle, are not sufficient

to contain him or explain him. To some unknown shrine he must have found his way, at some mysterious altar he must have laid his gift, some very present god his prayer received. Else how can we put in his mouth the words of the psalmist, as we may, "I have more understanding than all my teachers. I understand more than the ancients"? To expect us to believe that the nine spinsters who flitted in muslin about the spring of Helicon had led him a merry chase over the heights of Parnassus; to say that a winged horse had taken him a mad gallop through the frigid empyrean; to insist that the wild maid of Cumae had panted prophecies into his favored ears, is as idle as to ask us to believe that Homeric Nestor understood the past, the present, and the future. Nestor was no prophet. He was merely a fortune-teller, and the only evidence of his proficiency lies in the doubtful word of Homer, babbling delightful wonder-tales to uncritical Greeks. Even Apollo, "augur Apollo," is a sorry prophet, more fit to furnish figures of speech to poetasters than to uplift a nation. From Delphi to Zion is a long, long way.

To solve the difficulty we have once more unearthed there is but little evidence. Livy is lacking save for the epitomes, and epitomes are about as satisfying as the disjunct members of a Christmas turkey, though even from these a trained paleontologist might reconstruct a bird with as much certainty as an expert text-mechanic could rebuild an author from the lacunae. Even if we had Livy, however, we should not have the history of the swarthy strangers that hived in the congested valleys and recesses of the seven hills, only of the nobs and nabobs who lived on their tops. Livy does mention plebeians, of course, but it is the subplebeians we should be interested in, the multitudes that came from the Nile, the Jordan, the Orontes, the Tigris, and the Euphrates. How abundant was this class in the slums of Rome in the last century of the Republic we may infer from the fact that already in the previous century they were a pest to landlords like the elder Cato. In these classes only a sociological historian would have interest, and Rome certainly never possessed a sociological historian. It is only in random references that we may hear of these undesirable aliens, cheats, frauds, swindlers, oracle-mongers, and poison experts.

Yet they were always present. The immigration laws were lax and decrees of banishment soon forgotten.

These oriental scoundrels had ideas, nevertheless. They had knowledge and could read and write. They could cast your horoscope as well as poison your rich uncle. It was they that knew the past, the present, and the future. They knew what was in the earth beneath and what was in the heaven above. The fate of the soul after death was their secret. For a consideration payable in advance they would even contract to show you how to obtain immortality. What do you imagine was the subject of conversation at the board of the old Cilician pirate as he and Virgil feasted on their unbought banquet? It was those amiable rascals, as we know, who first brought the story of Mithraism to Italy, a cult so rich in content that beside its mythology the skimpy legends of Rome seem like a Pompeian wall-painting beside the Sistine Chapel. Compared to the rich conceptions of that ancient and highly developed oriental religion, we know that the stateliest ceremonial of old Rome was about as spiritual as a historical pageant or a triumphal procession. If you prefer to think that the farmer-poet from the Mincius and the old pirate discussed nice problems of apiculture or fowl-brood, or the best method of forcing vegetables, we leave you to dwell on these sumptuous thoughts. We think differently and our faith transcends footnotes. We believe that Virgil, who stammered and suffocated in high society, was, like Charles Lamb, quite at home with rogues, with Syrian landladies and market-gardeners, and I believe he plied that old tar with wine and questions until he tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

If you demand of us the footnotes, we retort that Virgil read much, and wrote less than two lines per day in twenty-five years; that poets above all men conceal the background of their thought; that oriental literature was issued cheaply and circulated clandestinely; that a work like the Septuagint version of the Old Testament would beyond doubt have been classified as Sibylline literature and was consequently subject to the censorship, which may account for the lack of specific mention of it in tradition; that perhaps one-quarter of one per cent of the whole literature, and none of the

cheap literature, has survived. The Jews were in Rome as early as 139 B.C. and were well known to Cicero, and were still better known to the Augustan circle. Who can then assert that knowledge of prophecy in a large way was likely to be hidden? The life of Rome's underworld must always remain a secret, it is true, but we can hardly deny its existence nor fail to perceive that all our Roman historians are interested solely in the chronicles of a dominant social class. It would be marvelous if the cheap and clandestine literature had survived; it would be still more marvelous had it exerted no influence.

We are strongly inclined to believe that those Orientals, many of them, who swarmed and steamed and peddled horoscopes and trinkets and immortality up and down the Velabrum were sages compared to the noblemen we read about in Cicero, Livy, or Tacitus. We are strongly inclined to believe that Virgil was in touch with this fertile life below stairs, that from the Orientals he caught the prophetic form into which he cast his epic, that he caught from them the breadth of vision that is the basis of prophecy, which none of his compeers ever seized. It seems attractive also to believe that, while the upper classes continued to read the *Aeneid* for generations merely as poetry, its immediate and universal popularity was due in part to its sentiments being tuned to the vibrations of hearts that could take no part in Roman polity. He was in real truth the prophet of the Gentiles. He dreamed dreams and he also saw visions. He is the father of romanticists. His mind was shaped for the reception of verities which the day in which he lived could neither understand in full nor entertain; his soul is haunted by unheard melodies, ditties of no tone, strange harmonies for which slow time had failed to find notation. He discerns a domain that he may not enter, a horizon that he may not pass. He lives and moves and has his being, not in the glory of the classic sunset, but in the radiant twilight of the modern dawn—

The spirit of the years to come  
Yearning to mix himself with life.